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ABSTRACT

This document is a guide for small school districts that are interested in using a nongraded arrangement at the elementary school level. Nongrading recognizes that children learn at different rates and in different ways and allows them to progress as individuals rather than classes. A 4-year phase-in approach eases implementation of the nongraded system. After the phase-in period, one additional grade level should be added each year until grades K-6 are completely covered. A school-based team reviews and places students by considering the students' mental, physical, emotional, educational, and social development. Teams of two or more teachers assume responsibility for groups of learners through cooperative planning, instruction, grouping and regrouping, and student evaluation. The continuous progress approached promotes mainstreaming of exceptional students allowing teachers of special programs to serve as consulting teachers or tutors. Gifted students work at the level that best meets their needs. Suggested solutions for several problems offered, including: (1) statewide testing based on grade levels; (2) the expectation that students will receive report cards indicating their promotion to the next grade level; and (3) state reporting systems using grade categories. (KS)

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CONTINUOUS
PROGRESS

WITH

MULTI-AGE GROUPING AND TEACHER TEAMING

A NONGRADED IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

FOR

SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

RC 018371

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CONTINUOUS PROGRESS WITH MULTI-AGE GROUPING AND TEACHER TEAMING

A NONGRADED IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE FOR SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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June 1991

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PREFACE

It was the small rural school that once exemplified what is now advocated for all schools: children of many different ages and ability levels living and working together; teachers planning flexible and broad-gauged lessons on topics that would be of interest and value to pupils at many different levels of development; children and teachers staying together for several consecutive years; and a feeling of "family membership" within the learning community.

Teachers in such situations, as well as their pupils, usually fared quite well, even though resources were often limited. It should not be frightening for today's teachers, who enjoy far greater resources and methodologies to call upon, to enter into such an arrangement. Furthermore, today there is a very strong trend toward team teaching (in its many versions), which means that no teacher needs to feel "all alone" in the enterprise of modernizing the school program. "Modernizing" now is understood to mean meeting the many different needs of children so that they can all succeed. It means softening the competitive pressure on children, and making sure that their accomplishments are sufficiently acknowledged and rewarded (the A-B-C-D-E-F report card is no longer acceptable as a motivation/reward system). It means helping each child to make as much progress, each year, as is possible, and abandoning the cruel and ineffective practice of non-promotion ("flunking" children) and retention. Especially, it means helping each child to find excitement and enjoyment in the school program, and pleasure in the many interactions (with several adults, and with other children of all ages and types) that the school encourages.

The program that is outlined in this memorandum is designed to make the process of developing and implementing a nongraded program as "painless" as possible. In my view it is a conservative approach, which for many will be welcome. I hope, however, that some schools will elect to proceed more rapidly toward Phase IV and Phase V. The long-term goal of a fully-implemented program featuring all of the organizational elements (continuous progress; teaming; multi-aged basic grouping; many different kinds of skills and interest groupings; a rich, integrated curriculum) is an admirable one. I salute all of the teachers in Texas who will embrace this opportunity and move forward with courage and enthusiasm. I also predict that in a few years, all of those teachers will wonder why they waited so long to "jump in!"

Robert H. Anderson

INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF DOCUMENT

This document should serve as a guide for small school districts that are interested in using a nongraded arrangement at the elementary school level. The authors of this document discuss the background of their study, a philosophy of nongraded schools, implementation phases, administrative arrangements, funding, and the impact of special programs within the nongraded system. The suggestions in this document are based on the following: (a) the theoretical framework of John Goodlad and Robert Anderson (1987), (b) the experiential factor of Marti Frankovich, principal of a nongraded elementary school, and (c) the observations of teachers regarding the theory and practice and the development of a nongraded program for the rural or small school district.

BACKGROUND OF NONGRADED SCHOOLS

A nongraded school is one that seeks to provide every child with maximum opportunity to make significant academic and psychosocial progress during each school year, free of the fear of nonpromotion and empowered to make many meaningful connections with the full spectrum of other learners. The most effective nongraded programs are those that bring together learners of several adjoining ages (therefore the term "multi-age grouping") in a heterogeneous context, and that feature teams of teachers working toegether (as contrasted with the pattern of self-contained classrooms).

In a nongraded school, children are encouraged to work closely together toward mutual goals, and the one-against-one patterns of competition reflected in traditional ABCDEF report cards are deliberately minimized. Each child works toward the accomplishment of his/her personal goals. Earnest effort is expected and rewarded, and although they will probably enjoy school more, it is likely that the pupils will be working harder, rather than less hard, in a truly nongraded program. Research evidence shows that children in such programs, at all ability levels, usually succeed much more than do children in graded classes. Although the lock-step, rigid pattern of the graded school might conceivably have served a useful purpose in the distant past, it is now abundantly clear that in the 1990s it does more harm than good.

The continuous progress approach is an alternative to transitional programs which have come under fire recently by some educators. (The concern expressed by these educators is that transitional programs appear to increase drop-out rates as opposed to decreasing them.) As an alternative to transition programs, this arrangement supports the elimination of failure and retention by allowing children to move through the curriculum at their own rate. "Nongraded classrooms offer numerous advantages, including more individualized instruction, a better social climate, and fewer retentions, say advocates of the practice." (Willis, 1991, p. 1)

PHILOSOPHY

The general philosophy of the nongraded school has been explained by Von Haden and King (1974) as follows:

> Nongrading is a philosophy of teaching and learning which recognizes that children learn at different rates and in different ways and allows them to progress as individuals rather than classes. Such designations as grade one or grade three are eliminated. Flexible groupings allow the pupil to proceed from one level of work to another whenever he is ready. Thus, the child's progress is not dependent upon that of others in the room. His own readiness, interest, and capacity set the pace for each pupil... Flexible grouping permits each child to move ahead with other children of approximately the same level of ability. Groupings are different for each subject area and can be changed at any time. Failure, retention, and skipping of grades are replaced by continuous progress as the pupil proceeds at his own rate. Slower children are not forced to go on with the class group before they are ready. Faster workers are not compelled to wait for the others. Individualization and continuous progress are the key elements of nongrading (pp. 30-31).

The philosophy of Lowell School, Salt Lake City, Utah, is as follows:

> Continuous Progress at Lowell School has been established to meet the needs of all students in the Neighborhood Program. Our main objective is to provide the correct educational program for each individual child. Continuous Progress is based on the premise that learning should be continuous; that a student should not repeat what he/she already knows and that the student cannot proceed into more difficult learning with gaps of unlearned important material.
>
> Continuous Progress is a way of custom-tailoring for each child to increase the rate and degree of learning, and to insure that the student is always working with the best possible conditions at the precise point where knowledge leaves off and learning needs to begin.
>
> All students have the opportunity to make continuous progress in their learning in order to achieve their maximum potential.
>
> Students are grouped according to multi-age levels, rather than grades. They are assigned to a team of teachers instead of a self-contained classroom with only one teacher.

The philosophy of the nongraded school in the small school district may appear as follows:

> We believe that all children can learn, but that all children do not learn at the same rate nor do they learn best by the same instructional methodology. It is our belief that a nongraded or continuous progress arrangement can meet the needs of all learners. By allowing the learner to continuously advance through the curriculum, the gaps that may occur through the traditional delivery system are minimized. Through this arrangement all categories of learners are met at their individual level of need and their individual knowledge base, with increased or decreased rates of learning. A multi-age grouping pattern is advocated in this model which furthers our belief that we are a community of variance, not of sameness. The continuum of rural life is multi-faceted in that the young and old learn from each other; they support each other; and they care for each other. Daily life is a continuous progression with learning opportunities available through real experiences, all done in due time or at the right time. It is the belief that nongraded delivery system provides the opportunities that build a community of learners and provides continuous progress in their learning in order for all students to achieve their maximum potential in the appropriate amount of time and at the right time.

IMPLEMENTATION

In order to successfully implement the nongraded system or the continuous progress system in the rural or small school district, the following phase-in approach is suggested. It is recommended that a four-year phase-in be established due to the paradigm shift that must occur from traditional grade level approaches to the continuous progress model with no grade levels (see Appendix A for visual representation). Preliminary planning is an important component of this model. Modification and flexibility are the keys to the implementation plan.

PHASE I

In Phase I (year one) of the program, an implementation task force should be established for the campus in which the system is to be implemented. It should be their task to study the model in-depth and develop the framework for operationalizing it on the campus. Additionally, this task force should develop a comprehensive staff development plan for administrators, teachers, and the school board. The staff development should consist of, but should not be limited to, the basic concepts of the continuous progress delivery system. Additionally, the plan should include types of teaching methods that would complement this delivery system - include current practices. Such teaching methods may include cooperative learning, peer tutoring, strategies for multi-age grouping, whole language, teaming, and modification management. This list is certainly not exhaustive. Whatever has been identified by the task force, based upon needs and study, should be included in the plan.

In addition to the school district personnel who are to receive in-depth training, it is important to also remember the community at large. The parents and community leaders should be briefed in the concepts of the continuous progress philosophy. They should have an understanding of what is about to be implemented because of the shift in the mindset that this model requires.

Some essential tasks must be completed at this implementation stage. Objectives for each level, based upon the language arts scope and sequence must be developed. Teaming should be heavily stressed at this time, since teachers working together is the key to continuous progress success. Criterion tests or curriculum based tests must be developed for these objectives. A curriculum, based on these objectives, either must be developed or must be revised from the original document.

The first year should be a time of study, development, and readiness for the district personnel, the parents, and the community; this should ensure a smooth beginning of the second year of implementation.

PHASE II

It is recommended that the program be implemented in the first grade language arts area for the second year. Obviously, this is not a multi-age grouping; however, this initial arrangement does allow for observation and continued time for intensive staff development. The students in this arrangement are allowed to move within the grade level at their own pace and may have more than one teacher during the day. On-site consultants for the nongraded approach should be employed to assist as well as on-site consultants for various teaching methods. This allows time for the staff to do problem solving and strengthen the program for broader implementation the following year. Selected campus representatives should visit other districts where continuous progress has been implemented and is successful. Reports of the visit should be shared with the home campus. (Note that when the district is extremely small, that is with less than three first grades, it is recommended that the phases be compacted to include the multi-age grouping at an earlier phase.)

Included in this phase is the team teaching of a social studies or science unit either within a grade level or cross-grades. For example, each teacher could select a specific National Park. Teachers could plan the specifics to be covered in relationship to each park (animal habitats, climate, vegetation, etc.) Students could be either assigned a group, or let them choose which parks they want. Then student groups rotate among teachers. This provides experience in both teaming and student movement. The students could also rotate for music, P.E., and art with each teacher teaching her/his expertise. This should be done with all grade levels and teachers during PHASE II and III.

At the end of this phase, an evaluation of the program should be completed to determine the needed changes and/or additional staff development needs.

PHASE III

In PHASE III, or the third year, training in the program concepts must be given to new staff members on the campus. Training for new faculty is essential each year to ensure continued success. At this point, it is important to move the program into the next grade level. For this year, the first and second grades should move into multi-age grouping for the language arts area. Note, grade levels are still in place at this point. Children simply begin to move at their own pace within a system that begins to give them opportunities to do so without graded confines in the language arts area. As before, a year-end evaluation of the program is necessary to determine needed improvements and/or additional staff development. These evaluations should be both formative and summative in nature.

This year should also include the procedures for establishing the curriculum and criterion test for math as was done with the language arts curriculum.

PHASE IV

In PHASE IV, or fourth year, it is recommended that math be included in the multi-age grouping patterns for grades K-2 (K level language arts should also be added.) All students in grades K-2 should be in flexible multi-age groupings for language arts and math. Students are likely to have more than one teacher at this point. Students monitoring of progress should be occurring and flexibility in grouping is accomplished through team evaluations of students. The teachers are in charge of who should be placed where. In these two subjects during the day, the numbers of students in each teacher's classroom may vary. One teacher may have 25 students in math, level one, while another teacher may have 14 students in math, level two. The numbers should not be of concern, rather the level of learning within that class should be the concern for the review and placement team.

Implementation of the program should continue with one additional grade level each year and with each grade level adding all subjects until grades K-6 are covered. By adding one grade level per year and by adding other subjects, students will have continual progress through the program. Prior to adding new grade levels, teachers on each level will need training and will need to develop appropriate curriculum and criterion tests.

ADMINISTRATIVE ARRANGEMENT

GROUPING

The main objective of the grouping pattern is to provide the correct educational program for each individual child. To optimize learning, teachers consider information from five areas of a child's development. Mental, physical, emotional, educational, and social development are all taken into consideration before placements are made. Based on information obtained through observations, assessments, formal and informal testing, and use of local norms, a determination is made within each team as to:

* What style of teaching is best suited to the particular learner?
* In what peer groups will the student work best?
* At what level of difficulty in each subject area should each student work?
* A student's individual interests
* A student's level of motivation and self-concept
* A student's past experiences

Within each team, no group or teacher assignment should be permanent, but should continue only as long as it is judged productive. A school-based team should be established to review and place students. This team determines when a student is ready to make changes. This team may function very much the same way that an Intervention Team would function in reviewing students who are deemed at-risk.

TEAMING

Team teaching is the assumption of responsibility for a group of learners by two or more teachers through cooperative planning, instruction, grouping, and regrouping and student evaluation. Teachers work together to achieve mutually agreed-upon objectives. Teacher strengths are maximized through team teaching.

Teaming in Continuous Progress may look like this:

Team L - Lower Elementary
Team U - Upper Elementary

The focus of the *Lower Elementary* team, which consists of ages 5 - 8, is the development of the child's self-concept, his/her relationship to himself, to his peers, to adults, to groups, and to new materials and ideas. As the child matures in this team the focal point is on the development of individual feelings of self-worth, competence and working productively with peers and adults.

The *Upper Elementary* team consists of ages 9 - 11. The major focus is on academic achievement, strengthening individual responsibility, broadening independent learning skills, and developing community responsibility.

Both teams are to interact with each other in order to ensure appropriate movement and learning skill continuum within the curriculum.

Hands-on approaches should be emphasized in all curriculum areas, especially in science and math.

Peer tutoring from the Upper team to the Lower team should be established.

FUNDING

Funding for the nongraded plan will be accomplished in the same manner as a graded program. There are some unique components that may be considered in funding this plan since the continuous progress promotes mainstreaming with support services. The notion of at-risk students being stigmatized is virtually eliminated.

Coordinated Funding Model (Davis & Van de Riet, 1989)

Why this model?

Finances in small districts are major issues; more and more money appears to be needed to serve the at-risk students (includes special education, at-risk, Chapter I, dyslexic, etc.). This model provides for the at-risk categories of students to be funded and served in the least restrictive environment.

This model allows the district to:

* save local dollars or redirect those dollars;
* have better on-site instructional supervision; and
* provide better services to all at-risk youngsters.

What is the model?

Under this model, positions can be split-funded when time and effort is kept in the service to various categories of students.

The positions the district will need to consider coordinating funds are as follows:

* Consulting Teachers
* Instructional Aides
* Instructional Supervisor
* At-risk Counselor
* Parent Facilitator

What funds can be coordinated?

All of these positions may be funded from the following sources with percentages dependent upon the number of categorical students served by each. (time and effort documentation is required)

Funding Sources

* Chapter I
* State Special Education
* State Compensatory Education
* Local

It is important for School Boards and Administrators to understand that Continuous Progress tends to take on a Site-Based approach which includes funding, text-book adoptions, use of special people and programs, staffing, etc. As a school tunes-in to meeting individual needs, then a paradigm shift occurs. The Board needs to be sensitive to creative and unique changes.

SPECIAL PROGRAMS

Where are the at-risk students?

The students are now served in a truly mainstreamed model that accommodates for all individuals' needs. All students are served efficiently within the teams. Students are now a part of homogeneous groups for language arts and math.

The teachers of special programs now begin to serve as Consulting Teachers or Learning Lab Center Teachers. They may go into the classroom to team with the regular teacher or may pull students out on an as needed basis. Through the Coordinated Funding Model (Davis & Van de Riet, 1989), the teachers are now able to serve ANY child who may need additional assistance.

Tutorials?

The special teachers may provide tutorials if they are needed. This continuous progress model virtually eliminates the need for tutorials. Multi-age tutoring will encourage the older students to develop responsibility while meeting the academic needs of the younger students. Peer tutoring can be accomplished through cooperative learning groups within a classroom and with peer tutoring strategies. To ensure community involvement, a volunteer program can be coordinated utilizing parents and other community members. If the district is near a university, university students can also be a great asset to a tutorial program.

Chapter I students may need to have special reading or math classes during the same time as the other students are having reading or math and may be served by a Chapter I teacher; however, if other students are in need of being served on that particular learning level, then they would be placed in the same class since the Chapter teacher is paid by Coordinated Funding.

What about the gifted program?

The Gifted Program may be provided through the nongraded system. Multi-age and heterogeneous groupings allow gifted students to work at the level that best meets their needs. Extension activities, including higher level thinking skills, research skills, independent study and mentoring, should be included within each team. If the district has a special teacher of the gifted, then periodic enrichment pull-out may be beneficial, or a consulting teacher model may be implemented to support extension activities within each team.

PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED

The following are problems that need to be considered when implementing the nongraded school.

1. Statewide Criterion Tests may be administered at grade 3 and grade 5 (TAAS in Texas).

   Possible Solution:
   a. All students age graded may take the State Criterion Test at the appropriate time.
   b. Students who have mastered the essential elements or basic skills for taking the State Criterion Test may take it at the appropriate time.

2. Report cards are expected that say Passed to Second Grade.

   Possible Solution:
   a. Continue to use report cards, and as you phase in the model, continue to use grade levels.
   b. Move toward a report card that reports accomplishments in terms of objectives.

3. Reports for PIEMS (Texas) or other state reporting systems.

   Possible Solution:
   a. Use the age graded appropriate categories.

Other considerations for implementation:

A. Complexity involved in the implementation of the model
B. Requirement of flexible staff
C. Requirement of time commitment of staff
D. Staff training in paradigm shifts and teaming
* All emphasize adequate staff development

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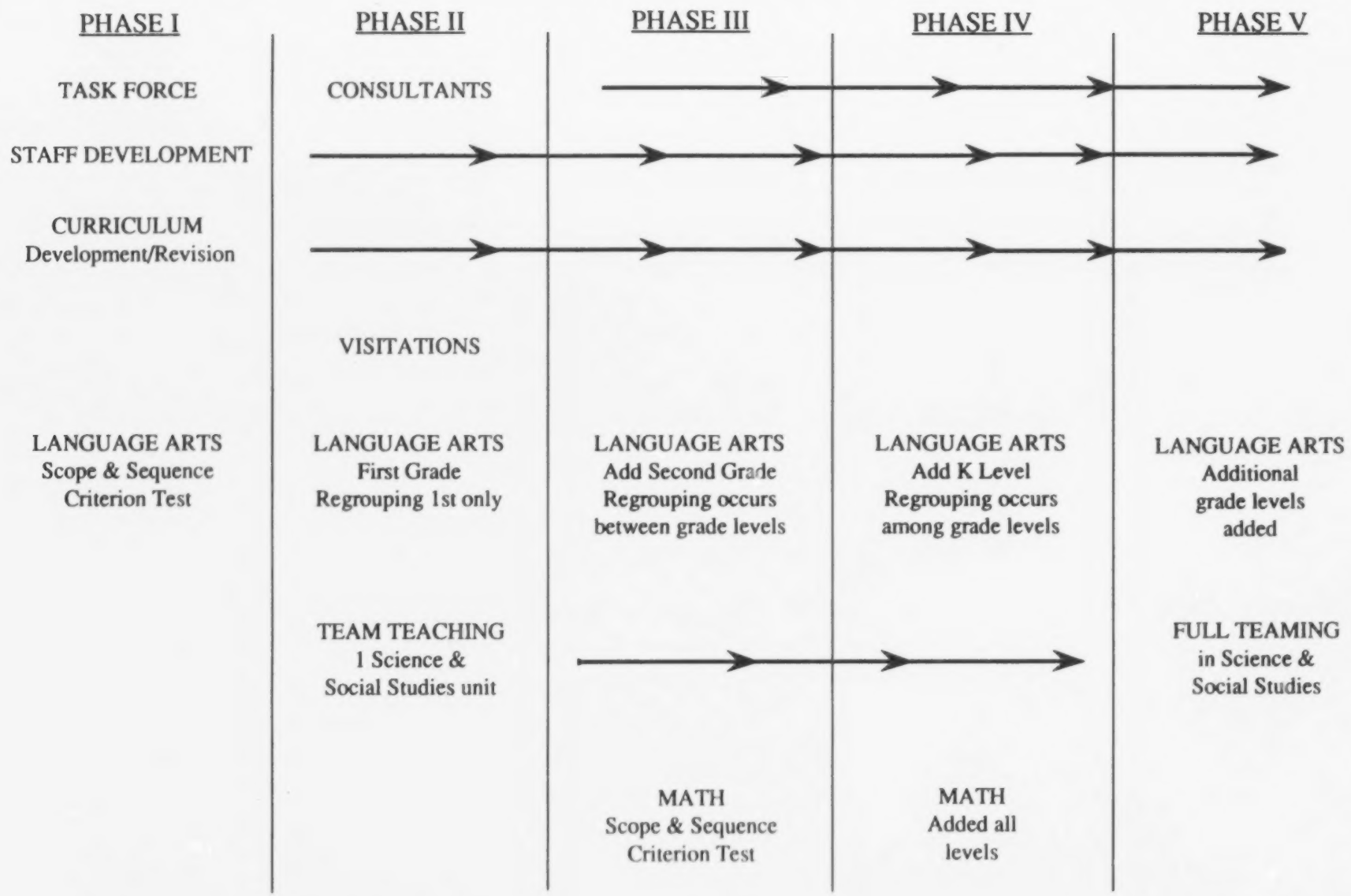
Appendix A

EXAMPLE: K-2 CAMPUS



** Provide for continuous evaluation and monitoring of the program at all phases.*